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# Experiential Knowledge and the Cognitive Act

One of the hallmarks of science is its ability to produce reliable knowledge, facts, about our natural world. The scientific method is designed to filter out subjective influences that would compromise objectivity. This is often done by avoiding the first-personal perspective all together and in many fields this has led to great success. In recent times, however, there is an increasing number of researchers who acknowledge the importance of the first-personal perspective in relation to knowledge. For example the field of mental health has seen the rise of so-called experts-by-experience, people who do not necessarily have an academic background in their field of expertise, but have experienced the phenomena they specialize in directly, that is, from a first-personal perspective.

In their paper *Experiential knowledge in mental health care: A coherent concept?* Roy Dings and Derek Strijbos explore the concept of experiential knowledge (EK), which refers to the unique knowledge that experts-by-experience are taken to have. The concept has not yet been properly investigated from an epistemological perspective: it is vague, suffers from conceptual tension and it is not clear what type of knowledge it is. Another researcher that has pointed out a lack of attention for the first-personal perspective in epistemology is Maria van der Schaar. She argues that we should pay attention to it, because all knowledge starts with a cognitive act which is done from a first-personal perspective. In this essay I will introduce the conceptual messiness of EK and van der Schaar's account on the cognitive act, which I believe could help clarify EK.

## Experiential Knowledge

The medical field has been in a paradigmatic transition from the biomedical goal of curing illness to a recovery paradigm where the goal is to enable people to live meaningful lives, with or without symptoms (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 4). To achieve this goal EK is already being professionalized and operationalised within the field. Although medical specialists are great at identifying illness, what counts as meaningful depends on the experience of patients themselves. Experts-by-experience are involved in the reorganization of care and the revision of treatment protocols. This is not only about giving former service users a voice, it is done with the assumption that their lived experience can provide unique and complementary knowledge (5).

Epistemology has a rich history in identifying different kinds of knowledge. A classic distinction made is for example that between know-that and know-how. Know-that is propositional knowledge. You know *that* WWII ended in 1945 or *that*  $1 + 1 = 2$ . Know-how is a

more embodied kind of knowledge. You have know-how about how to ride a bike or how to comfort a crying child. You just know how to do such things without being able to explain it intellectually.

In the literature, experiential knowledge is often contrasted with know-that. It is described as knowing “what it is like” to live with a particular illness for example. EK is described as holistic and encompassing the “cathetic dimension”, or emotional evaluation of self and certain situations (15). EK is also construed as something learned not intellectually but “through the reactions and habituations of the body” (19). First-personal reports on experiences can be studied statistically and qualitatively, but the researchers conducting these studies will still miss something in their knowledge about the phenomena studied, something that a person with EK does have (14).

Prima facie EK seems to be thus a kind of know-how. However, EK is supposedly generalizable as well. EK should go beyond the individual and be applicable to others (11). Moreover, most researchers agree that someone with lived experience does not automatically have EK. One needs to do something with that experience to transform it into EK: acts of reflection, narration or sharing can do the trick (16). Such processes abstract away from the embodied quality of EK, but increase its generalizability (18). This internal tension of EK being on the one hand grounded in embodied experience and on the other hand generalizable is what Dings and Strijbos point out as a conceptual problem. They suggest, therefore, a pluralistic approach to EK, where EK is jointly constituted by many different kinds of knowledge, some of them more or less embodied or generalizable, and which need to be properly taxonomized (25).

## Cognitive Act

In her paper *The cognitive act and the first-person perspective: an epistemology for constructive type theory*, van der Schaar introduces the notion of cognitive act (act of knowing) for a better understanding of first person knowledge claims (van der Schaar 2011, 391). A cognitive act is an (immediate) insight or an act of perception that may be expressed as ‘now I understand it’ or ‘now I see it’. It is the “penny that drops” so to speak. Examples of a cognitive act can be judgmental (perceiving *that* a hawk is catching a bird or realizing *that* 0 is a natural number) or non-judgmental (perceiving the hawk) (392).

Van der Schaar associates the cognitive act with an active type of knowing. The distinction between active and passive knowledge has a history in philosophy and was already maintained by for example Aristotle and Locke (394-5). The active cognitive act can lead to two different passive kinds of knowledge: a knowledge product (a piece of abstract knowledge) or a state of knowing in the individual (397-8). For example a person can learn *that* the oven is hot by a judgmental cognitive act based on experience and retain that knowledge as an abstract knowledge piece in memory which could be shared with others. This person could also retain this knowledge as a state of knowing, where in a next encounter with an oven the body would retract quickly, as to avoid being burned.

The main point that van der Schaar makes is that the cognitive act should not be overlooked in the explanation of knowledge. Scientific knowledge for example, a collection of pieces of abstract knowledge and states of knowledge in individual scientists, is a form of passive knowledge that results from the cognitive acts made by individual researchers and must therefore be explained in terms of the cognitive act (397). My argument is that this also applies to experiential knowledge.

Let's take the example of a person reflecting on their process of coping with a certain illness. This process could be identified as a judgemental cognitive act, where they draw certain conclusions like "asking for help works well". This conclusion could be an abstract knowledge product that could be shared with others easily as a proposition. Conversely, a person that has experienced the resistance and lack of possibility in one's world during a depression might have learned this through a perceptual cognitive act and this could have led to an embodied state of knowing of what it is like to have depression.

Van der Schaar's extensive analysis of the cognitive act and the processes that lead to different kinds of knowledge could help create the desired taxonomy for EK. Furthermore, her in depth analysis of how the cognitive act produces justified knowledge (for which I unfortunately do not have the space here to elaborate on) could explain how EK could be both grounded and generalizable. Lastly, van der Schaars account on the cognitive act shows that EK is not that special a case as it is taken to be, all knowledge is grounded in the first-personal perspective.

## References

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